

A celebration of bugle corps past

By MATT CONNOR — For The Express

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To everyone who knew him, he was known as "Hefty," a nickname that seemed strangely incongruous, considering how tall and slender he was. But he was also known as "The Father of the Drum and Bugle Corps in Lock Haven," and that designation fit him perfectly. Indeed, no one did more to excite local youngsters about music of all kinds than St. Clair "Hefty" Myers, whose devotion to the horn and the drum was only surpassed by his love of children.

"Hefty and (his wife) Marcella were just great parents," said Flemington's Betty Diehl, whose husband Bud spent much of his childhood in the Myers house, "and they just loved all those kids in the corps."

"Hefty took us over and we practiced two or three times a week and every Saturday morning," said Gurden Dietz, who spent his formative years playing in various Myers-directed marching bands. "Most of the time on Saturdays we practiced at Price Park. We used to have drivers go by truck drivers and that sort of thing and pull over and come in and watch us practice."

A naturally gifted musician, Myers spent decades working in dance bands when he wasn't teaching music at Lock Haven High or selling men's clothes at the local Montgomery Ward.

"A precise man in appearance and musical aptitude, (Myers) had a particular skill in forming, drilling and presenting for prize-winning acclaim his various drum and bugle corps," reported The Express at the time of his death in the late 1960s.

He met his wife, the former Marcella Chevalier, during the Jazz Age, when he was touring the nation with the Donley Orchestra and she showed up to see the band perform in her home town of Ottawa, Illinois. They were married in 1927 and he brought her home to Lock Haven, where his family was, at one time, one of the most influential legal names in the city.

Decades prior to his birth, Myers' father and grandfather developed the "Myers' Block," not far from the original county courthouse on East Church Street between Henderson and Washington Streets. Its location made it attractive to attorneys, who soon filled the block with law offices. Among the lawyers making the Myers' Block their professional home was St. Clair's own father, Attorney John B. Myers.

In 1893, however, the old courthouse building was torn down, and Robb Elementary School went up at that location, now known as 400 East Church. Attorneys largely abandoned the location at that point, and instead moved to the current "Lawyer's Row" on East Water Street. Now John Myers' former office buildings filled instead with families renting apartments.

"I lived in one of the houses on the old Myers Row," said Dietz. "It was called Myers' Row because his father or grandfather built them. Different people owned different houses, but they were all called the Myers' Row."

"Hefty's father was a lawyer, and when we were kids, all of the law books were on the third floor, in the attic. We used to play with them."

Despite his earlier success with touring dance bands, Hefty found his true calling during the 1930s, when he became a music teacher under then-Pres. Franklin Roosevelt's National Recovery Administration (NRA) programs, according to Dietz.

"Hefty was, primarily, a teacher of music and instrument training at Lock Haven High School under a federal program," Dietz said. "He did that for several years, during the depression. During that time, each fire company had their own musical organization. The Citizens Hose had a band and the Hand-in-Hand Hose Company had a drum and bugle corps that was directed by Hefty Myers."

"They went to the 1936 World's Fair and marched in a big World's Fair Parade and the Lock Haven Hand-in-Hand Hose Company came back with First Place in drum and bugle corps."

It was a thrilling time for Depression-beseiged residents, who found themselves cheering for the little drum and bugle corps that had earned national recognition.

Dietz was one of a group of youngsters who were so caught up in the fire company band's success that they built up their own "junior" organization, which Hefty was happy to help guide.

"We, as kids, when the Hand-in-Hand Hose Company came back with the championship, we sort of went through the alleys and picked up these hat boxes that the clothing stores put out and we started a little organization with nothing but hat boxes," Dietz said. "We did this on the Robb school grounds."

An undated newspaper article found in Betty Diehl's archive confirms Dietz's tale of the hat boxes.

"A bunch of kids from the First Ward want to organize a Junior Drum and Bugle Corps, emulating the handsome performers in the popular Hand-in-Hand outfit," the local paper reported. "They had no money, so they went to local clothing merchants who supplied them with cardboard hat boxes which were fashioned into drums."

In 1938 or '39, Dietz said, the little musical group held little "penny festival" to raise money for real instruments and uniforms.

Article Photos



PHOTOS PROVIDED
This parade in 1956, probably celebrating the Black Knights' victory in a national competition. Raymond Yarnell Jr. is at center, with sword.

"Instead of lights, we had lanterns, and most of the things we offered were a penny," said Dietz. Despite the modest prices, the group earned about \$65 from their festival, the equivalent to about \$1,000 today, based on the Consumer Price Index.

"That started us off with the Lock Haven Junior Drum Corps. We bought some bugles from a company down in Williamsport and we had white sweaters and navy long pants and sailor hats. That was our first uniform."

Bud Diehl was also part of that early group, according to his wife, Betty, who was interviewed on Thursday night, after Bud had already gone to bed for the evening.

"They started early, when they were little, and made their own drums out of hat boxes and Hefty started them then," she said. "They all stayed together and when they grew older they became the Senior Drum Corps"

From there the group developed into an even more advanced group, the Black Knights Drum and Bugle Corps of VFW Post 1630, and Hefty guided the young men to state championships every year from 1947 through 1950 and again in 1956. They were national champions in 1949, '50 and '53.

His charges clearly idolized St. Clair, though the popular bandleader occasionally showed a darker side to his personality.

"The only bad thing about Hefty was that he liked the booze a little," said Dietz. "It seemed every time he went out to play, the band would take breaks and he would drink a bit and usually he became not his particular self. He came home a little drunk a few times. That was his downfall. But as a musician, there wasn't a better musician anywhere than Hefty Myers."

Despite his alcoholic overindulgences, the boys in the drum and bugle corps demonstrated an almost single-minded devotion to both Myers and their musical endeavors. That, says Betty Diehl, it could sometimes be difficult on relationships.

"Bud and I got married in 1946 and he was in it then," she said of the corps. "He was 21, and all through the years that we were married he was in the Black Knights. For almost all of our whole lives he was in it. They'd do everything in town. Sometimes the wives and children would go along, but all we did when they were playing was take the kids to parks. We were called the Black Widows because they were always gone, every weekend and every holiday.

"Oh god, they were dedicated," she added. "They practiced almost every day of the week. Boy, we had some good arguments back then!"

Meanwhile St. Clair and Marcella were raising their own two sons to follow in their father's musical footsteps, and young Bob and Marceau (known as "Pooch") developed into world-class bandleaders on their own, both eventually leading marching bands in highly-regarded university music programs.

"Bob Myers became one of the best drum majors and baton twirlers in the state, and I'm not exaggerating," said Dietz. "He could throw that baton up higher than anyone else in any of the parades where we ever performed. He was able to catch it time and time again."

And during the late 1950s, a young fellow named Ray Yarnell Jr., helped bring the corps some of its final moments of glory, including the group's victory at the 1956 VFW national open class title competition.

"After Raymond Yarnell Jr. phoned home with the good news, Dean Sheasley, commander of the local VFW post, arranged a welcome with city officials and the unit arrived in Lock Haven to parade down the street carrying the trophy," The Express reported.

But within a few years circumstances beyond the control of Yarnell, Dietz, Diehl and Myers began to impact the future of the drum and bugle corps. The Korean War thinned out the corps numbers, as did the growing conflict in Vietnam in the 1960s. Myers' death in 1968 was another blow, and four years later the devastating 1972 flood ruined much of the corps' equipment and treasury. A year later a fire at the local VFW hall destroyed some of the group's trophies.

The 1970s brought the Lock Haven Redevelopment Authority's urban renewal project, when most of the homes of the original drum and bugle corps members on North Henderson Street were torn down in the name of cleaning up blight in the city. Now the "Myers' Block" was no more.

By then memberships in most local civic, fraternal, veteran and volunteer organizations began to decline sharply and the bands that had once been an important part of the culture were being phased out.

What may have been the last gasp for the old Black Knights Drum and Bugle Corps as an organization occurred in 1990, when a massive reunion was held at the local VFW hall, and nearly 50 former members of the corps showed up to raise a toast to the "old days."

Hefty's son Bob, baton-twirler extraordinaire, was keynote speaker at the event.

Many hoped it would mark the first of a series of annual events celebrating the proud history of the Black Knights, but it wasn't to be. In the nearly two decades since that one and only reunion, many of the former members including Hefty's two gifted sons have gone to their reward, and every year there are fewer and fewer left who remember the great work St. Clair "Hefty" Myers did in the community, and the sense of pride he instilled in his young charges.

"It's really more than a drum corps," Hefty told The Express after his team won its first national championship. "Ask any of the corpsmen, and he will tell you he is doing something for the community.

"It does something for the boys, too."

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